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Asia: Refugees flee worsening human rights situation

The current refugee crisis on Thailand's borders with Cambodia and Myanmar is just the latest manifestation of a worsening human situation across the Asia-Pacific region, Amnesty International said today, as it accused governments in the region and elsewhere of failing to provide proper protection to refugees and asylum seekers.

"An arc of refugee crises has emerged across the heart of Asia -- stretching from eastern Nepal, through northeast India, the Chittagong hill tracts in Bangladesh, and across into Myanmar and Thailand," Amnesty International said. "The vast majority of these people are women and children fleeing torture, "disappearances", political killings and arbitrary arrest."

"Longstanding problems elsewhere in the region -- such as the conflicts in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Bougainville, and repression in East Timor -- have also created large outflows of people seeking refuge."

"Governments in the region and elsewhere have reacted to this crisis by putting up barriers to make it difficult for refugees to gain asylum and by sending asylum seekers back to face danger. They should instead be tackling the underlying causes -- human rights abuses -- as a means of promoting people's security and regional stability. "

In a report issued today as part of its worldwide campaign on refugees, Amnesty International highlights four countries where people have faced human rights abuses because of their ethnicity or questions over their national identity: Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and East Timor. These countries form just one dimension of serious human rights abuses in almost every country in the Asia-Pacific region, leading to at least 1.8 million refugees and 1.7 million internally displaced people in the region.

In Myanmar, many ethnic minorities have been persistently targeted by the military for gross human rights violations as the government tries to assert its political control and open up rural areas for economic development throughout the country. As a result hundreds of thousands of Burmese people have been forced to flee abroad. Many of them have been illegally returned home to face danger, in violation of international law.

Internal armed conflict in Sri Lanka centred on the Sinhala-Tamil divide has caused hundreds of thousands of people to abandon their homes and flee the terror. Most are now internally displaced on the island.

In Bhutan, around 90,000 people have been forced to leave the country after the government arbitrarily deprived them of their citizenship because of their ethnic identity. Most are now living in Nepal, fearing that they will never be allowed home.

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East Timorese people continue to suffer as a result of the Indonesian government's 20-year campaign of repression and intimidation to stamp out independent identity. Many of those who have tried to escape have been denied asylum on the grounds that they have theoretical claims to Portuguese citizenship.

Conflicts and repression connected with ethnic, national and religious divisions are behind the flight and plight of many other refugees. Decades of systematic repression by the Chinese authorities of Tibetan national, religious and cultural identity has generated a refugee diaspora from India to Europe. Around one fifth of the population has fled Afghanistan as a result of the fighting, while some 300,000 Kashmiri Hindus and 50,000 Kashmiri Muslims have fled the Kashmir valley.

The vast majority of refugees have sought safety in other Asian countries. Those that have sought refuge further afield are increasingly being denied asylum. However, Asian countries are also sending back refugees forcibly or reducing their food supplies to such an extent that the refugees are forced to leave their camps.

In its report, Amnesty International calls on regional governments to immediately ratify the United Nations (UN) Convention relating to the status of Refugees and to respect the fundamental principle of *non-refoulement* so that no refugee is sent back to their country to face danger. The organization also called on governments to allow the UNHCR and other aid and medical organizations access to refugee camps around the region.

Most of the Asian states have not signed the UN Convention relating to the status of Refugees which protects refugees. Elsewhere, regional bodies such as the Organization of American States, the Arab League and the Organization of African Unity have drawn up instruments designed to protect refugees in their regions. However, in the Asia region there does not seem to be any movement towards a similar agreement.

"Refugees seeking asylum in the richer Asian countries face procedures that can be bewilderingly complex and unsatisfactory, where they have no access to independent advice or representation, and no real prospect of exercising their right to appeal," Amnesty International said.

In Australia, all asylum seekers face automatic detention while their claim is assessed -- in clear violation of international standards. In April 1997, the UN-based Human Rights Committee stated that Australia's practice of detention was arbitrary and violative of human rights.

Asylum seekers in Japan are sometimes denied access to asylum procedures altogether. Those who are allowed to submit claims are put through a secretive, arbitrary and often obstructive process. Others have been threatened with refoulement to face further danger. Despite the continuing crackdown on dissidents in China, Japan has so far only recognized one Chinese person as a refugee in more than 15 years.

Elsewhere in the world, governments, particularly in Western Europe, are also making it more difficult for refugees to seek asylum. "In promulgating restrictive legislation such as visa requirements, these governments conveniently ignore the fact that refugees fleeing for their lives are not in a position to spend several days queuing at the embassy for a visa or filling out the myriad of forms required to leave their country legally," Amnesty International said.

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For a copy of the report, Ethnicity and nationality: Refugees in Asia, or to arrange an interview, please call:

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